

GAO

Briefing Report to the Chairman and
Ranking Minority Member,
Subcommittee on Defense, Committee on
Appropriations, U.S. Senate

August 2001

MILITARY PERSONNEL

Longer Time Between Moves Related to Higher Satisfaction and Retention



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**United States General Accounting Office
Washington, DC 20548**

August 3, 2001

The Honorable Daniel K. Inouye
Chairman
The Honorable Ted Stevens
Ranking Minority Member
Subcommittee on Defense
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate

Periodic relocations are a basic fact of military life. The Department of Defense (DOD) reports that every year, about one-third of all military members make permanent change of station (PCS) moves. In addition, such moves may involve the members' dependents and household goods.

PCS moves also involve considerable cost to both the government and individual servicemembers. DOD's fiscal year 2001 appropriation for PCS travel expenses was more than \$2.8 billion. But, since PCS cost reimbursement is based on what property a member was authorized to move and weight allowances that vary by grade and dependents, not all relocation and moving costs incurred by military personnel and their families are necessarily covered by the government. According to DOD, mid-grade and senior noncommissioned officers (enlisted personnel in grades E-5 to E-9) average more than \$1,000 in nonreimbursable expenses each time they move. Among officers, members' out-of-pocket costs are even greater.

Your Subcommittee asked us to provide information related to the experience of military personnel regarding permanent change of station moves. We briefed your staff on our findings on May 20, 2001. As agreed, this report addresses

- PCS tours (including the average duration of PCS tours and the subgroups that experience shorter times between PCS moves, the relationship between shorter duration tours and satisfaction and retention, and the most frequently experienced PCS problems and the subgroups they affect) and
- unaccompanied PCS tours (including the extent to which they occur and the subgroups that experience them, the reasons for unaccompanied tours, and the relationship between unaccompanied tours and satisfaction and retention).

The information in this report was derived from DOD's 1999 Survey of Active Duty Personnel. We worked with the Department to design this survey. It was mailed in the fall of 1999 to a stratified, random sample of over 66,000 uniformed personnel. DOD provided the final survey data to us in late 2000. The survey included several questions dealing with PCS moves. Detailed results and graphical displays appear in Briefing Sections I and II. Technical details about the survey are provided in appendix I.

Results in Brief

The average time between PCS moves was about 2 years. Personnel who were not married and had no dependents tended to have the least time between PCS moves while those who were married and had dependents had the longest average tour length. Lower ranking personnel moved more frequently, probably as a function of being in the early stages of their career where shorter duration moves may be associated with initial training assignments. Among the services, the Marine Corps had the shortest average time between PCS moves while the Air Force had the longest. The shorter Marine Corps' PCS tour length may be due to having a larger portion of first-term enlisted personnel relative to the other services, which would put more of them in that early career training window. Among enlisted personnel, those in the combat occupations (i.e., infantry, gun crews, seamanship, etc.) had the shortest time between moves, while craft workers (e.g., metal workers, construction workers, etc.) and support and administration occupations had the longest. For officers, those in the intelligence and tactical operations areas had the shortest average tours, while scientists and professionals, health care officers, and administrators had the longest.

The duration of PCS tours was related to satisfaction. Those with shorter time spent between moves were less likely to be satisfied with the frequency of PCS moves and less satisfied with the military way of life. Also, the shorter the average time between moves, the more likely the member's spouse or significant other was to favor the member leaving the military. Lastly, members experiencing shorter tours were less likely to indicate they would choose to stay in the military and were less likely to expect to make the military a career. However, it should be noted that career stage is highly correlated with retention and career intent. Since early career (i.e., lower graded) personnel are more likely to have shorter PCS tours, the relationship between retention and tour length may be partially a function of career stage. The largest increases in satisfaction and retention occurred where the average tour length went from 1-2 years to 2-3 years.

The majority of military personnel (56 percent) did not indicate any serious problems stemming from their most recent PCS move. The most frequently cited problem area tended to involve economic concerns. The most frequently cited problems were the loss or decrease of spouse's income (28 percent), change in the cost of living (27 percent), waiting for permanent housing to become available (26 percent), and spouse's employment (24 percent).¹ The types of problems varied by the type of personnel. Higher ranking personnel and personnel with dependents were more likely to cite problems dealing with family disruptions and housing-related issues, while lower ranking personnel were more likely to report problems with reimbursements.

Some PCS tours involve separation from the family. About 14 percent of those who were married and/or had dependent children were not accompanied by their families in the fall of 1999.² Air Force personnel were the least likely to be serving unaccompanied tours while Marine Corps personnel were the most likely. Enlisted personnel were twice as likely as officers (16 percent versus 8 percent) to be unaccompanied. Those stationed outside the 48 contiguous United States (OCONUS), particularly those in a foreign country or an American territory, were more likely to be serving unaccompanied tours than those stationed within the contiguous United States (CONUS). About half of those who were single parents were not accompanied by their families.

The most frequently cited reason for unaccompanied tours was that a member was either legally separated or divorced from his/her spouse (30 percent). The next most frequently cited set of reasons involved avoiding disruptions to the spouse's career or the education of spouse or children. Another set of reasons involved "permanently unaccompanied" tours where, for example, dependents were not command-sponsored and the cost of moving dependents would be borne by the member. About 28 percent cited "other" unspecified reasons. Since those citing other unspecified reasons were more likely to be in the lower enlisted grades (E4 and below) and more likely to report they were having trouble making ends meet, this category may be related to affordability. Those serving OCONUS tours were more likely to report that the tours were designated

¹ Since respondents were asked to check all that apply, percentages add to more than 100 percent.

² The analysis of unaccompanied tours includes only those who were married and/or had dependent children.

as permanently unaccompanied, while those serving unaccompanied CONUS tours were more likely to cite family disruption, the family would be joining them later, or “other” reason.

Those serving unaccompanied tours were less satisfied than those accompanied by their families with the

- overall military way of life (47 percent versus 54 percent),
- types of assignments received (45 percent versus 54 percent), and
- amount of personal or family time available (25 percent versus 34 percent).

In addition, they reported that their spouses or significant others were more inclined to favor them leaving the service. Finally, servicemembers who were not accompanied by their families reported that they were less likely to choose to remain in the military than those accompanied by their families (52 percent versus 60 percent) and had a higher expectation of leaving the service before retirement eligibility (45 percent versus 34 percent).

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft of this report to the Office of the Secretary of Defense for comment. The Department concurred with our report. The Department noted that it was important to recognize that no CONUS tours have been designated as “unaccompanied” and that all officially designated unaccompanied tours involved assignments outside of CONUS. When family members do not accompany members stationed in CONUS, the reason has involved the choice of the member and the family.

The full text of the Department’s comments appears in appendix II.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees; the Honorable Donald H. Rumsfeld, Secretary of Defense; the Honorable David S.C. Chu, Under Secretary of Defense, Personnel and Readiness; and the Director, Office of Management and Budget. Copies will also be made available to other interested parties upon request.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact Dr. William Beusse at 202-512-3517 or me at 202-512-5559.

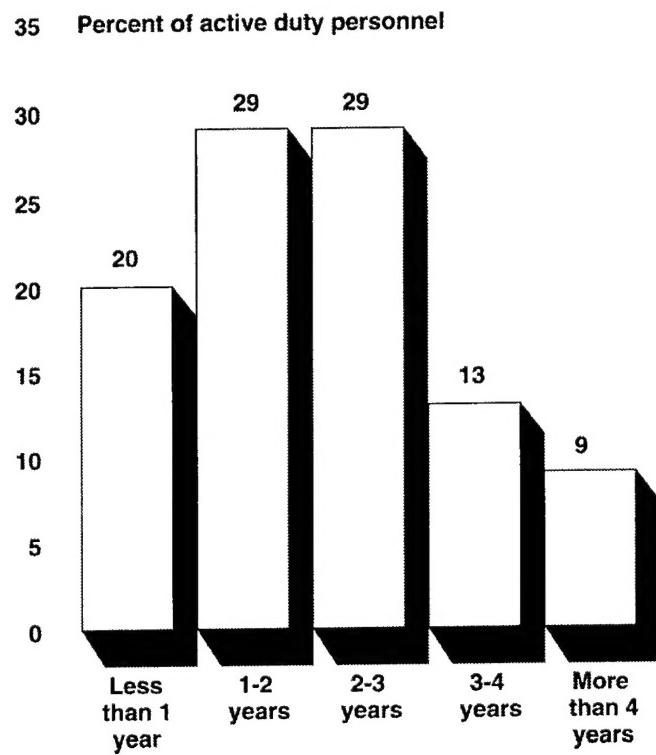


Derek B. Stewart
Director
Defense Capabilities and Management

Briefing Section I: Permanent Change of Station Moves



Average Duration of PCS Tours During Career



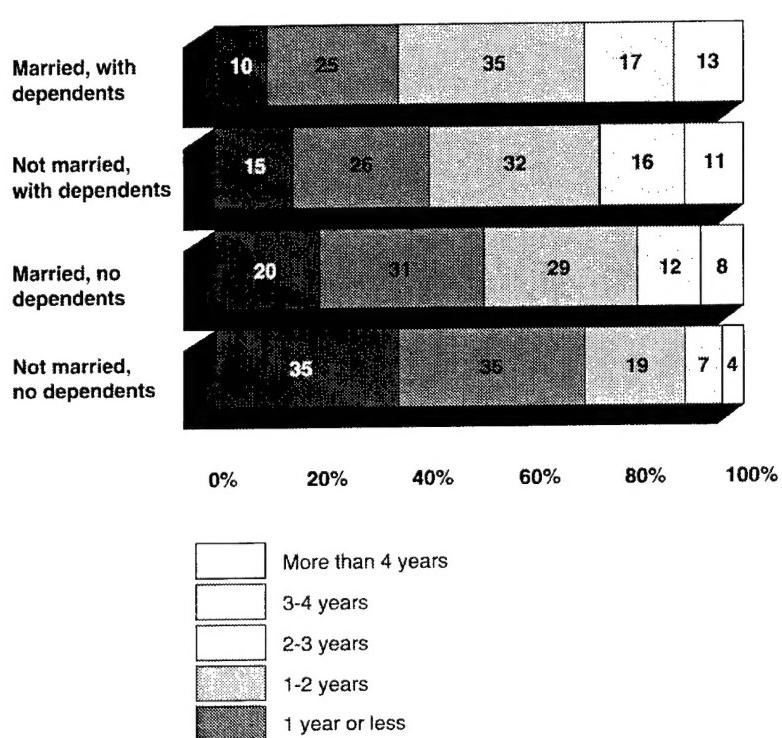
Source: GAO analysis of DOD's 1999 Survey of Active Duty Personnel.

The 1999 Department of Defense (DOD) personnel survey asked respondents to indicate how many permanent change of station (PCS) moves they had made during their active duty careers. We took their response to this question and divided it into the number of years of service they reported. This gave us a measure of the average length of the PCS tours they have had. Since the response alternatives on the question on the number of PCS moves grouped all moves in excess of 10 into a "10 or more" category, our constructed measure tends to produce a somewhat higher estimate of average tour length for personnel with high years of service than such personnel actually experienced.

The average time between PCS moves was about 2 years. About 20 percent had an average tour length of only 1 year or less, while about 9 percent averaged more than 4 years per PCS tour.



Average Duration of PCS Tours During Career by Family Status



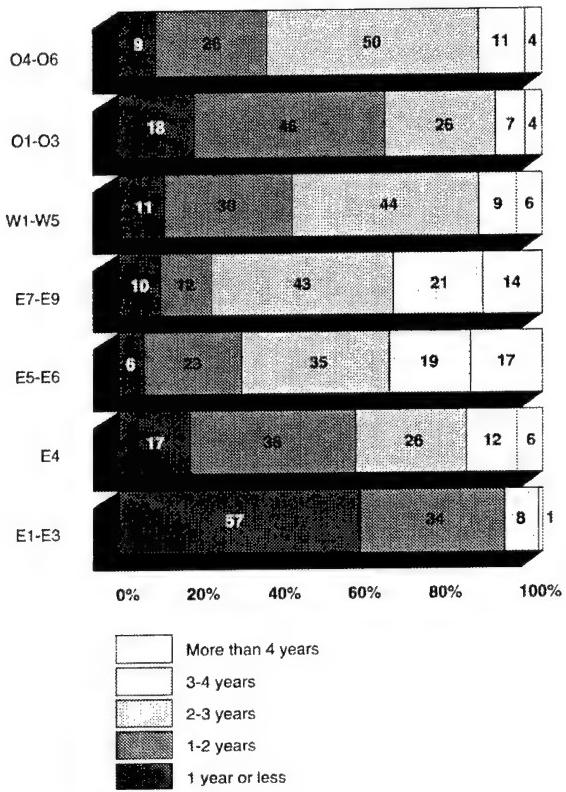
Source: GAO analysis of DOD's 1999 Survey of Active Duty Personnel.

**Briefing Section I: Permanent Change of
Station Moves**

The average time between PCS moves varied by family status. Those who were unmarried and had no dependents tended to have shorter PCS tours than those who were married and had dependents. The reason for this pattern is not clear. Since the bulk of those who are not married and have no dependents are in the early stages of their careers, their PCS moves may include more training tours, which tend to be shorter than operational tours. Also, those who have dependents may have purposely sought tours that would provide their families with more stability.



Average Duration of PCS Tours During Career by Pay Grade Group



Source: GAO analysis of DOD's 1999 Survey of Active Duty Personnel.

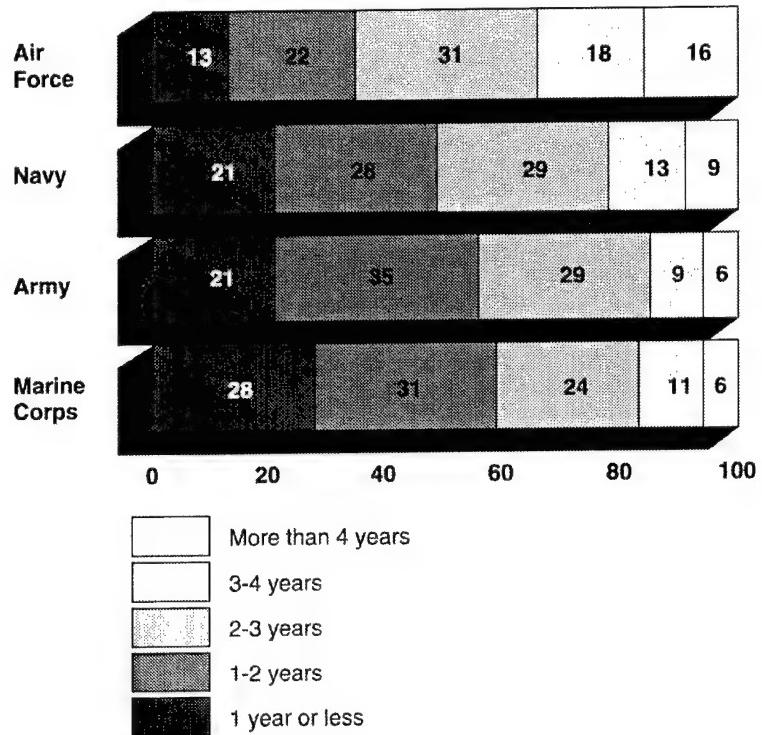
The average time between PCS moves varied by pay grade. Among enlisted personnel, those who were more junior (E4 or below) tended to have shorter average PCS tours. Again, this is likely due to a disproportionate number of shorter training school assignments in the early career stages. Mid-grade (E5-E6) and senior noncommissioned officers (E7-E9) tended to have the longest average PCS tour lengths. Among the officers, junior officers had a shorter average tour length than senior officers. Again, their PCS history is likely to include a disproportionate number of training assignments relative to operational assignments.



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Average Duration of PCS Tours During Career by Service



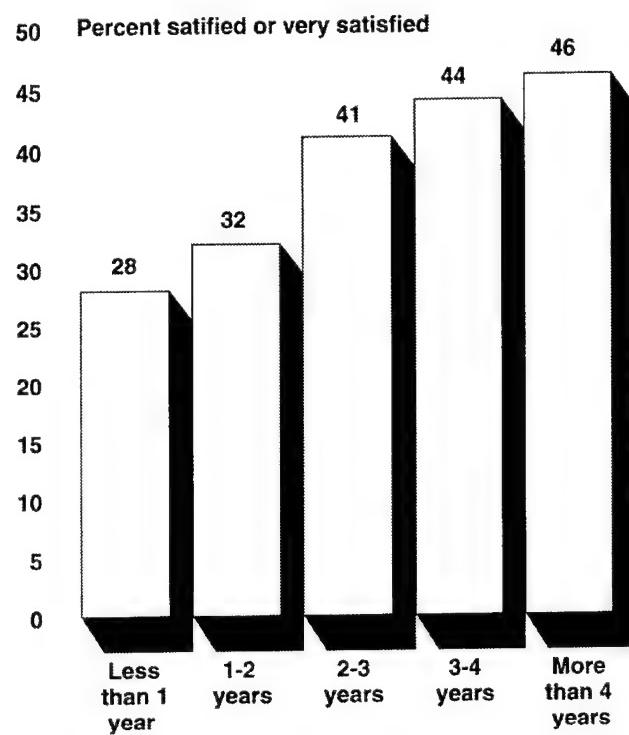
Source: GAO analysis of DOD's 1999 Survey of Active Duty Personnel.

The Marine Corps had the shortest average PCS tours while the Air Force had the longest. The shorter average PCS tour length of the Marine Corps may be due to its greater proportion of first-term enlisted personnel (42 percent) relative to the other services (which range from 18 to 23 percent), which would put more Marines in that early career training window.

The average length of time between PCS moves was also related to occupation. Among enlisted personnel, those in the combat occupations (i.e., infantry, gun crews, seamanship, etc.) had the shortest time between moves while craft workers (e.g., metal workers, construction workers, etc.) and support and administration occupations had the longest. For officers, those in the intelligence and tactical operations areas had the shortest average tours, while scientists and professionals, health care officers, and administrators had the longest.



Relationship Between Average Length of PCS Tour and Satisfaction With Frequency of PCS Moves

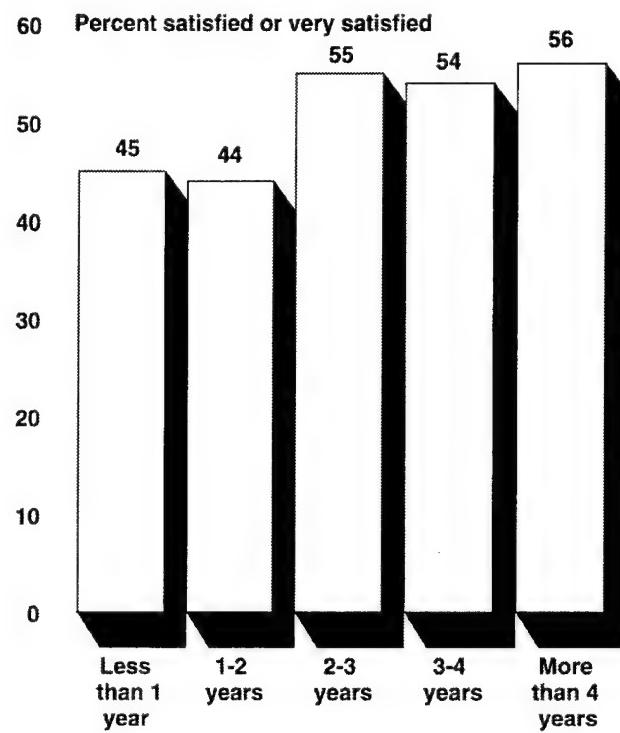


Source: GAO analysis of DOD's 1999 Survey of Active Duty Personnel.

The average duration of PCS moves was related to satisfaction. Servicemembers with longer average PCS tour lengths were more satisfied with the frequency of PCS moves. The largest decrease in satisfaction occurs between the 1-2 year tours and the 2-3 year tours.



Relationship Between Average Length of PCS Tour and Overall Satisfaction With Military Way of Life

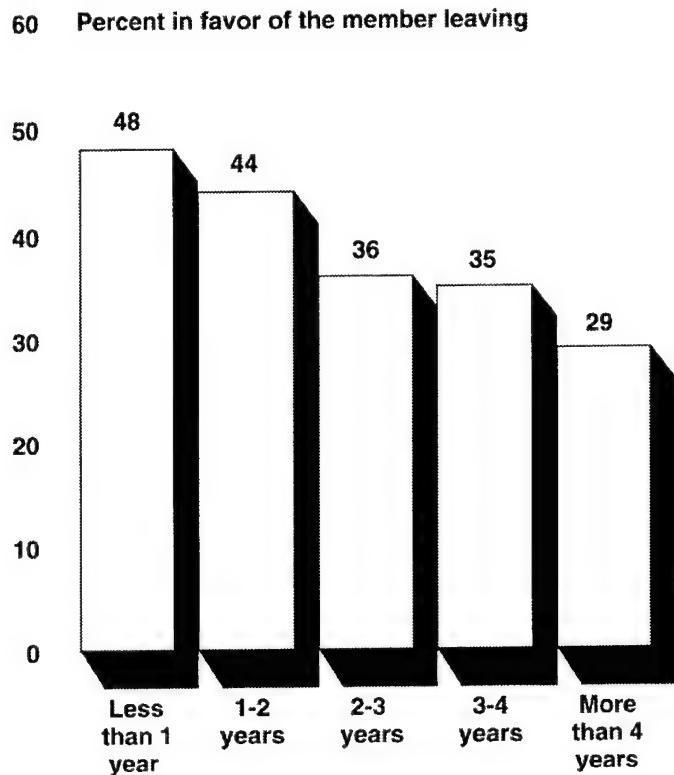


Source: GAO analysis of DOD's 1999 Survey of Active Duty Personnel.

Servicemembers who averaged less than 2 years between PCS moves were less satisfied with the military way of life than those experiencing longer tours. Two years seems to be the point at which satisfaction dropped off.



Relationship Between Average Length of PCS Tour and Views of Spouse or Significant Other Regarding Staying in the Military

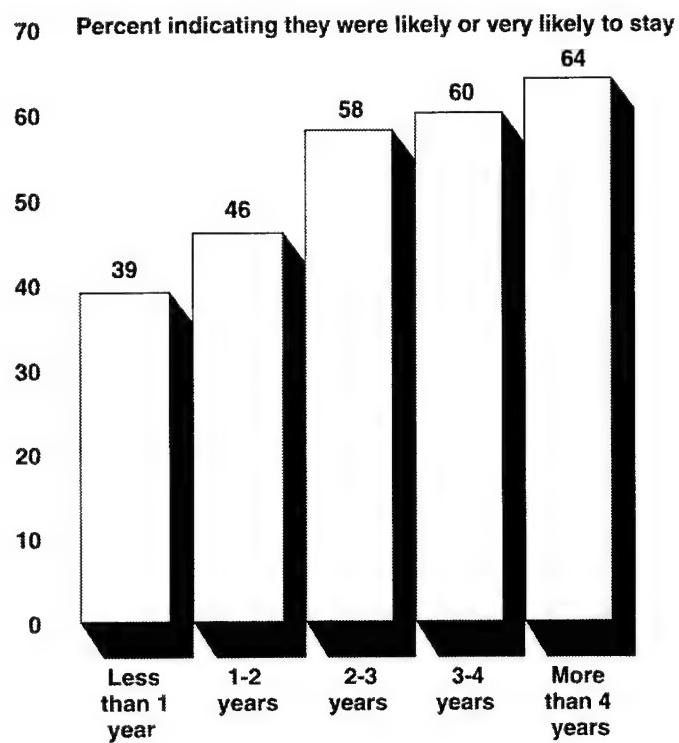


Source: GAO analysis of DOD's 1999 Survey of Active Duty Personnel.

The survey also included a question that asked, "Does your spouse, girlfriend, or boyfriend think you should stay on or leave active duty?" Servicemembers who averaged less than 2 years between PCS moves saw their spouses/significant others as less in favor of them continuing on active duty than those experiencing longer tours.



Relationship Between Average Length of PCS Tour and Likelihood of Choosing to Stay in the Military

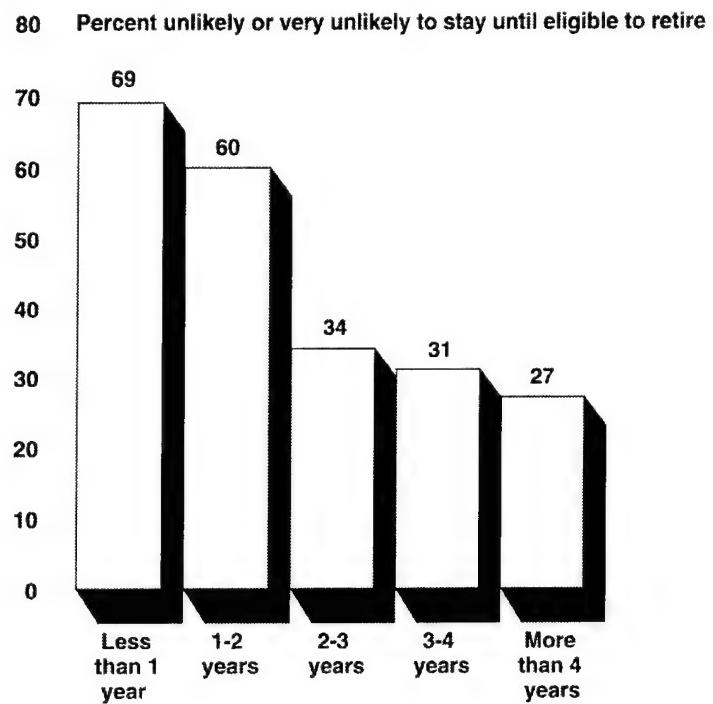


Source: GAO analysis of DOD's 1999 Survey of Active Duty Personnel.

Servicemembers with longer times between PCS moves were more likely to indicate they would choose to stay in the military. Some of the difference is likely due to those with shorter average tours being in the earlier career stages where retention intent tends to be lower.



Relationship Between Average Length of PCS Tour and Expectation of Leaving the Service Before Retirement



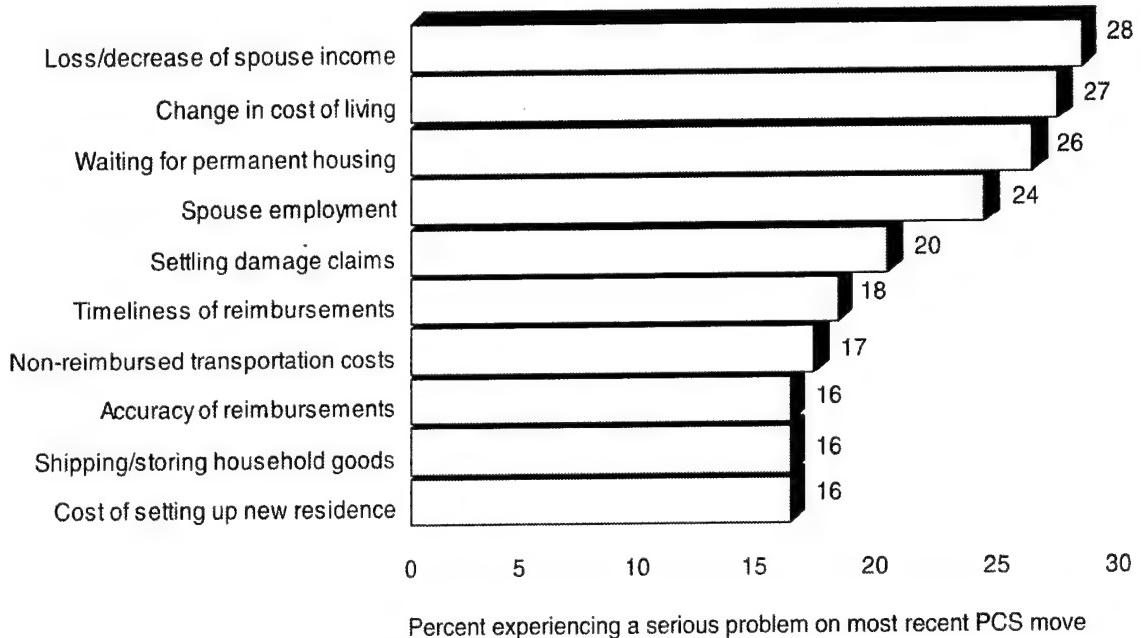
Source: GAO analysis of DOD's 1999 Survey of Active Duty Personnel.

**Briefing Section I: Permanent Change of
Station Moves**

Servicemembers with shorter times between PCS moves were more likely to indicate an expectation that they would leave the military before reaching retirement eligibility. Some of the difference is likely due to those with shorter average tours being in the earlier career stages where retention intent tends to be lower.



Most Frequently Cited Problems Experienced on Last PCS Move



Source: GAO analysis of DOD's 1999 Survey of Active Duty Personnel.

Overall, 56 percent of military personnel reported no serious problems arising from their most recent PCS move. Those stationed outside the continental U.S. (OCONUS) were more likely than those stationed in the continental U.S. (CONUS) to experience one or more serious problems. Unmarried personnel with no dependent children were the least likely to have incurred serious problems, while those who were married and had dependent children were the most likely to have encountered a serious problem. Also, higher ranking personnel were more likely to report having problems than lower ranking personnel. The thread running through these

results seems to be that problems are associated with the complexity of the move—such as moving overseas, moving a family, or moving more household goods.

Economic concerns tended to dominate the list of most frequently cited PCS problems. These included loss or decrease in spouse's income, change in the cost of living, spouse employment, timeliness and accuracy of reimbursements, non-reimbursed transportation costs, and costs associated with setting up a new residence (e.g., curtains and painting).

The least frequently cited problems were the transferability of entitlements such as Supplemental Security Income (cited by 3 percent) and obtaining special education services (cited by 4 percent). However, issues such as these are likely to apply to very few personnel. Consequently, while these percentages are relatively low among all DOD personnel, they may account for a significant proportion of the personnel dependent upon such benefits and services.

The types of problems encountered tended to vary by type of personnel. Personnel with dependents were more likely to cite loss or decrease in spouse's income, spouse's employment, availability of child care, spouse's or dependent's education, waiting for permanent housing to become available, and temporary lodging expenses as serious problems.

Lower ranking enlisted personnel (grades E1-E3) were more likely than other enlisted personnel to cite problems pertaining to reimbursement, such as timeliness of reimbursements, accuracy of reimbursements, non-reimbursed transportation costs. They were also more likely to cite "time off at destination to complete move" as a serious problem.

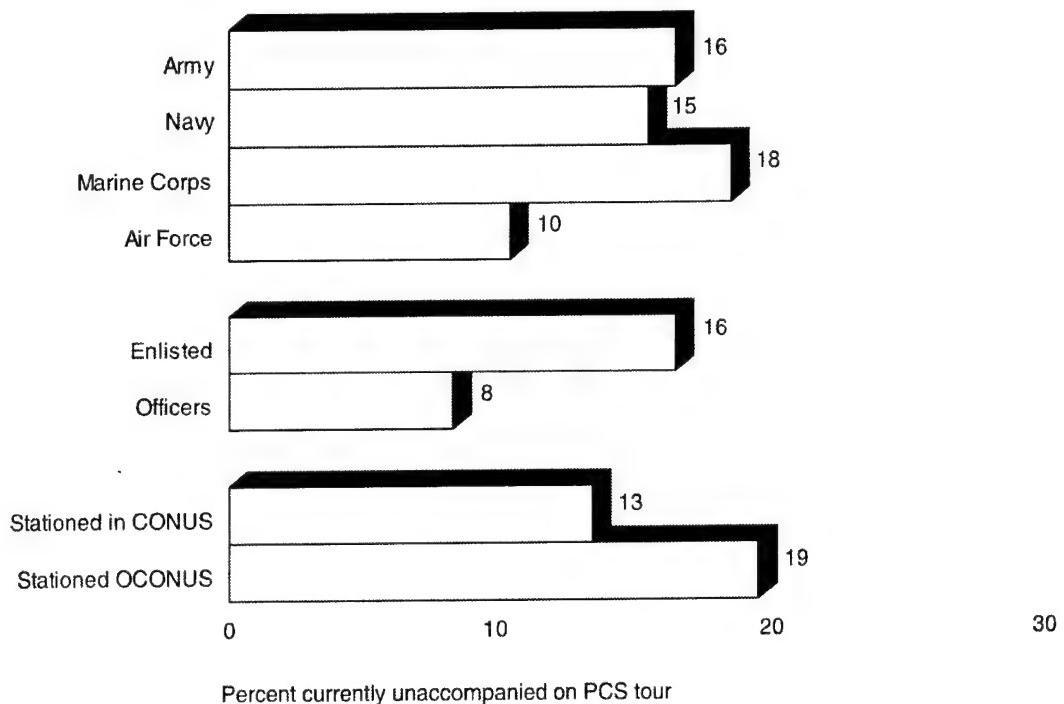
Higher ranking enlisted personnel (grades E5-E9) and senior officers (grades O4-O6), on the other hand, were more likely than lower ranking personnel to cite housing-related problems such as waiting for permanent housing to become available, selling or renting former residence, and purchasing or renting current residence. Another problem was costs of setting up a new residence.

Higher ranking enlisted personnel (grades E5-E9) were also more likely to identify family-related problems such as loss or decrease in spouse's income, spouse's employment, availability of child care, and spouse's or dependent's education.

Briefing Section II: Unaccompanied Permanent Change of Station Tours



Percent of Members Whose Family Did Not Accompany Them on Current PCS Tour



Note: This analysis only includes personnel who were married and/or had dependent children.

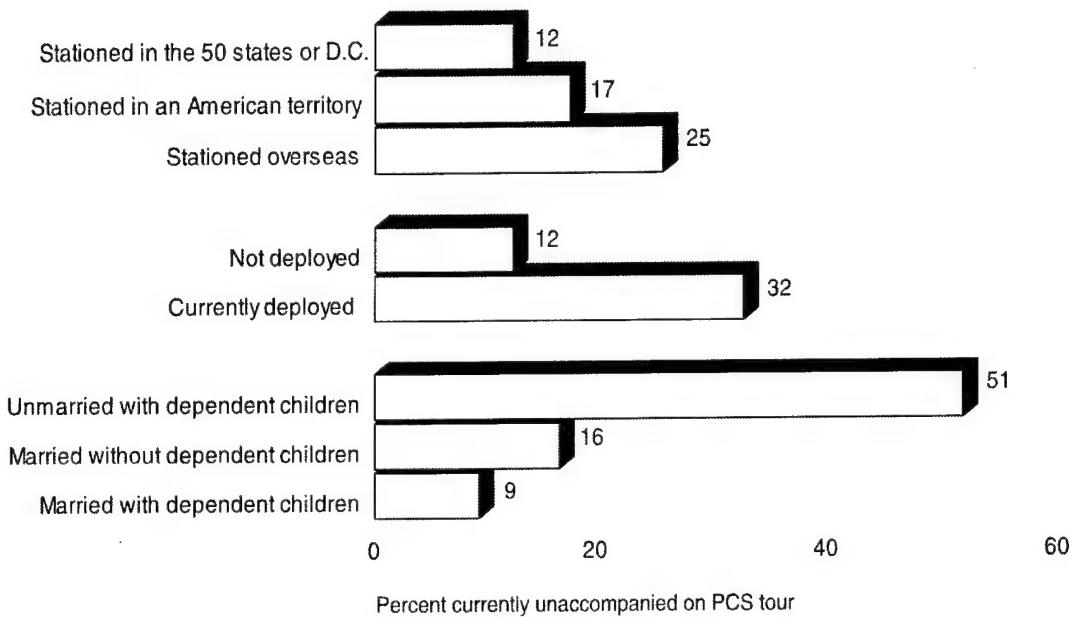
Source: GAO analysis of DOD's 1999 Survey of Active Duty Personnel.

Family members do not accompany a servicemember on every PCS move. The term “unaccompanied tour” refers here to situations where the spouse and family were not with the member at his/her permanent duty station. Designated unaccompanied tours are all overseas. There are a variety of assignments to locations overseas where the demands of the assignment, the potential safety of dependents, the lack of available family housing, or the high cost of a PCS move are potential issues. Typically, assignments to such locations will be of shorter duration (i.e., 1 year or less) to minimize family separation. For assignments within CONUS, the decision on whether to accompany the member is up to the member and his/her family. The following analyses of unaccompanied tours only include those who were married and/or had dependent children.

Overall, about 14 percent of military personnel who were married and/or had dependent children were not accompanied by their families in late 1999. Air Force personnel were the least likely to be serving unaccompanied tours, while Marine Corps personnel were the most likely. Only 8 percent of officers were not accompanied by their families, compared to 16 percent of enlisted personnel. Those stationed OCONUS were more likely to be unaccompanied than those serving in CONUS.



Percent of Members Whose Family Did Not Accompany Them on Current PCS Tour



Note: This analysis only includes personnel who were married and/or had dependent children.

Source: GAO analysis of DOD's 1999 Survey of Active Duty Personnel.

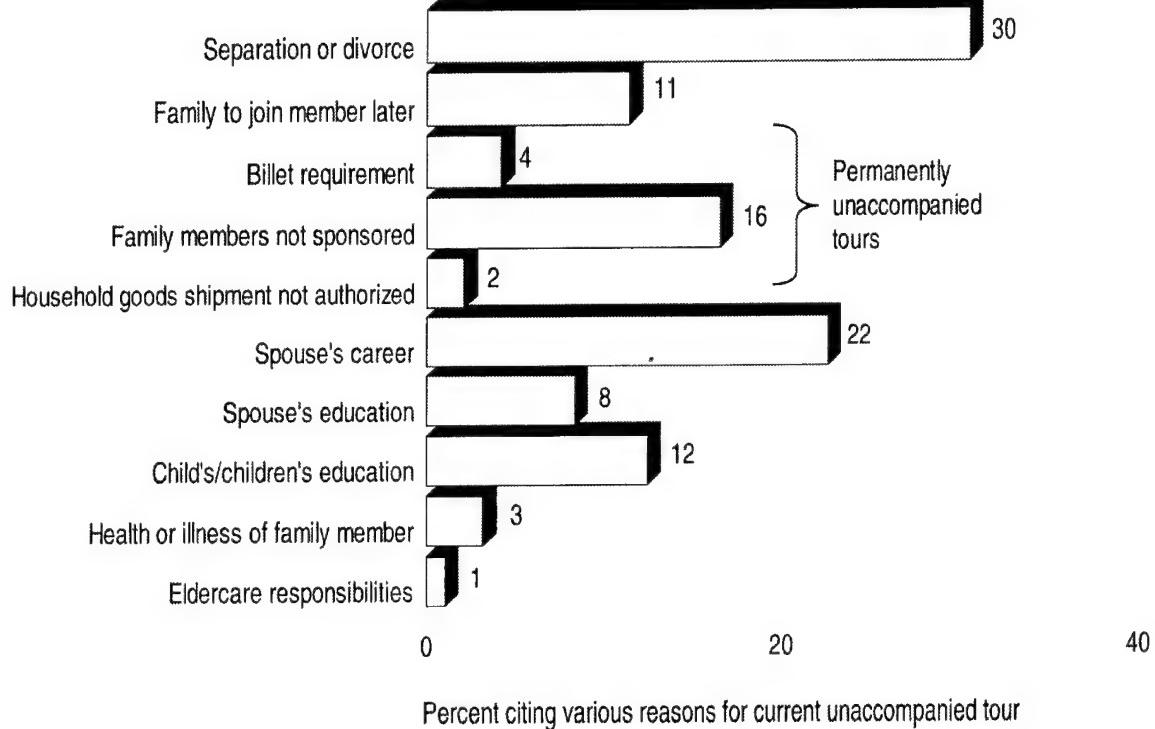
Where a servicemember was stationed had an impact on whether the family accompanied the member on the tour. About 25 percent of those who were stationed overseas were unaccompanied, compared to 17 percent of those stationed in an American territory (such as American Samoa, Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, or Puerto Rico), and 12 percent of those stationed within the United States.

Those who indicated they were currently on a deployment lasting at least 30 days were almost three times as likely to be on an unaccompanied PCS tour as those not currently on deployment.

A little more than half of the single parents were not accompanied by their families. Those who were married with dependent children were the least likely to be unaccompanied.



Reasons Cited for Family Members Not Accompanying Member on Current Tour



Note: This analysis only includes personnel who were married and/or had dependent children.

Source: GAO analysis of DOD's 1999 Survey of Active Duty Personnel.

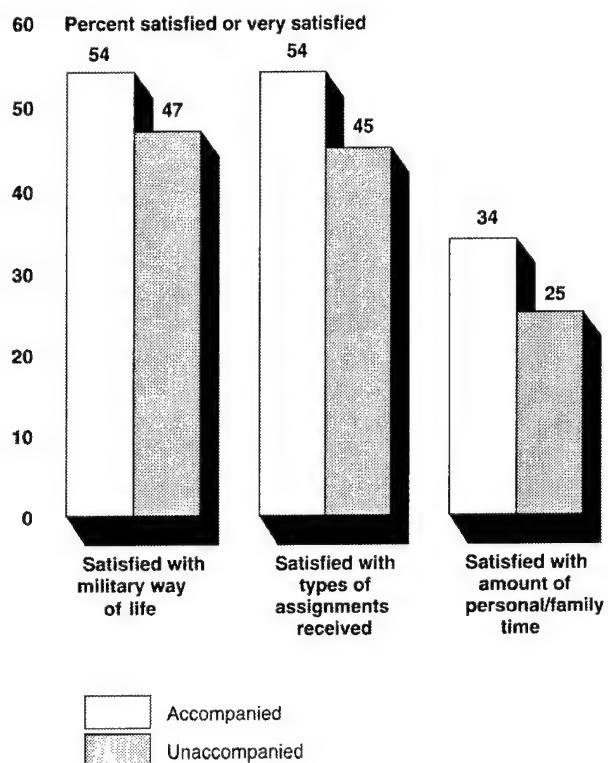
The percentage of servicemembers citing each of the specified reasons for their family members not joining them at their current assignment are shown. The most frequently cited reason was that the member was either legally separated or divorced from his/her spouse. The next most commonly cited set of reasons involved various disruptions to the family's activities, such as the spouse's career and the education of either spouse or children. The next set of reasons involved "permanently unaccompanied" tours, such as overseas tours for which family members were not command-sponsored, tours where being unaccompanied was a requirement of the authorization or billet, and tours where the shipment of household goods was not authorized with PCS orders. In 11 percent of the cases, family members were expected to join the servicemember at a later date.

About 28 percent cited "other" unspecified reasons. Those citing other unspecified reasons were more likely to be in the lower enlisted grades (E4 and below) and were also more likely to report they were having trouble making ends meet. Therefore, this category may be related to whether the family believed it could afford to accompany the member on the move.

About 29 percent of the unaccompanied tours involved OCONUS assignments. Those serving an unaccompanied OCONUS tour were more likely to indicate the tour was designated as a permanently unaccompanied tour, while those in unaccompanied CONUS tours were more likely to cite disruption of a family member's career or education, family would be joining them later, or "other" reason.



Relationship Between Unaccompanied Tours and Satisfaction



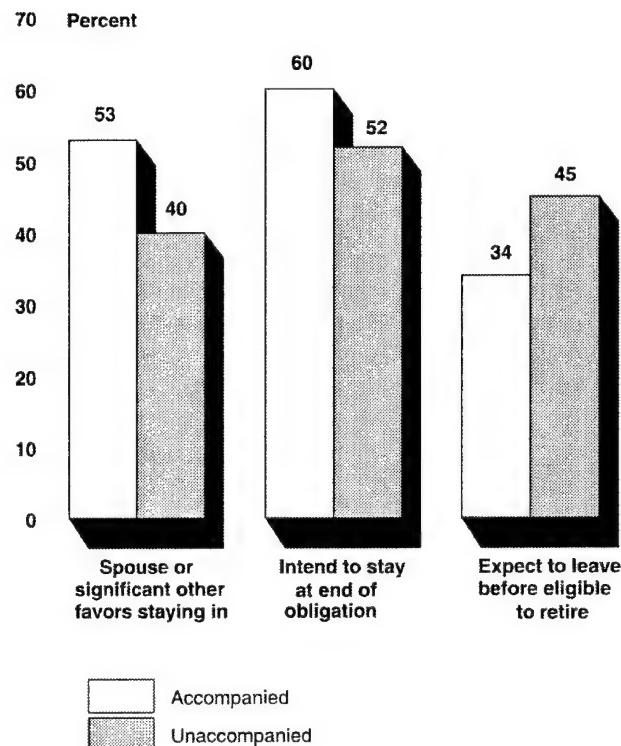
Note: This analysis only includes personnel who were married and/or had dependent children.

Source: GAO analysis of DOD's 1999 Survey of Active Duty Personnel.

Those serving unaccompanied tours tended to be less satisfied with the overall military way of life, less satisfied with the types of assignments received, and less satisfied with the amount of personal or family time available.



Relationship Between Unaccompanied Tours and Retention



Note: This analysis only includes personnel who were married and/or had dependent children.

Source: GAO analysis of DOD's 1999 Survey of Active Duty Personnel.

Those serving unaccompanied tours were less likely to indicate that their spouses or significant others favored them staying in the military than those on accompanied tours. Servicemembers who were not accompanied by their families were also less likely to indicate that they would choose to stay in the service and had a higher expectation of leaving the military before becoming eligible to retire.

Appendix I: Scope and Methodology

The data used in this briefing were derived from DOD's 1999 Survey of Active Duty Personnel. We worked with the Department to design this survey. It was mailed in the fall of 1999 to a stratified, random sample of over 66,000 uniformed personnel. DOD provided the final survey data to us in late 2000. Technical details about the survey are provided below.

We performed our work in April and June 2001 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Development of DOD's Active Duty Survey

DOD's active duty survey is a recurring survey that, prior to the 1999 administration, was last administered in 1992. When the Department learned that the Subcommittee on Military Personnel had asked us to administer a separate survey to military personnel, the Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense (Force Management Policy) offered to allow us to include questions on the survey DOD was already planning to conduct. We worked with DOD staff to refine the survey instrument and address additional content areas. The survey was pretested and refined at Navy bases around Jacksonville, Florida; Pope Air Force Base, Fayetteville, North Carolina; and the U.S. Marine base at Quantico, Virginia. Time constraints prevented additional pretesting with Army and Coast Guard personnel beyond that performed by DOD on an earlier version of the survey.

Sample Construction

The sample of 66,040 military members was drawn from a May 1999 population of 1,419,269 active duty DOD and U.S. Coast Guard personnel who were below the rank of admiral or general and had at least 6 months of service. The sample was stratified on five variables: service, pay grade, gender, location (inside or outside the continental United States), and marital status. DOD survey experts used response rates from prior surveys to adjust the sample for groups with differing expected rates of survey completion. Also, the sample was designed to provide varying levels of precision for numerous subgroups (e.g., + 3 percentage points for each service or pay grade group and + 5 percentage points for senior officers in the Army).

Survey Administration

As of January 4, 2000, DOD had received 37,119 surveys with at least some questions answered. Some surveys were eliminated because they (1) had been returned blank, (2) were duplicates, or (3) came from respondents who had left active duty before the fielding period ended. The unweighted response rate was 56.2 percent. After eliminating people who were

ineligible to participate in the survey, DOD computed a weighted response rate of 51 percent. DOD used a contractor to administer the survey. We did not test the contractor's procedures or validate the data provided to us. We did review DOD's and its contractor's quality control procedures for a similar large survey.

Weighting

Data were weighted to proportionally represent the target population. The weights reflected (1) the probability of selection for that member, (2) a nonresponse adjustment to minimize bias arising from differential response rates among demographic subgroups, and (3) a post-stratification factor for September 1999—the month in which the questionnaire was first distributed.

In recent years, both military and civilian surveys have experienced decreased response rates. Although weighting can adjust for the differing sampling rates and response rates within the sampling cells, weighting cannot adjust for possible differences between those who did and those who did not respond to a survey. As with most surveys, there is an implicit assumption that nonrespondents would have answered like respondents. There is some risk of nonresponse bias, but it is not really feasible to test for this bias. However, it should be recognized that the active duty survey is the only source of DOD-wide information for many issues, and it is far more reliable than anecdotal information or information generated by smaller, nonrepresentative samples.

Appendix II: Comments From the Department of Defense


OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
4000 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, DC 20301-4000

26 JUL 2001

FORCE MANAGEMENT POLICY

Mr. Derek B. Stewart
Director, Defense Capabilities
And Management
U.S. General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Stewart:

This is the Department of Defense response to the General Accounting Office (GAO) draft report "MILITARY PERSONNEL: Longer Time Between Permanent Change of Station Moves Related to Higher Satisfaction and Retention," dated July 2, 2001 (GAO Code 350071). The Department concurs with the report but suggests a clarifying correction.

To avoid confusion, the Department recommends clarifying the meaning of the word "unaccompanied" throughout the report. While it would appear that GAO's usage is solely descriptive of whether the spouse and family are with the service member, based on the wording of the survey, it should not be confused with unaccompanied tours as a matter of assignment policy. Designated unaccompanied tours are all overseas – there are no CONUS unaccompanied tours. In the case of CONUS assignments, a member may have reported being unaccompanied, but the reason will always center on the choice of the member, not the assignment itself.

If you require additional information, please contact Captain Elliott Bloxom at (703) 697-4166. The Department appreciates the opportunity to comment on the draft report. Thank you for your interest in this matter.

Sincerely,

P.A. Tracey
P.A. Tracey
Vice Admiral, U.S. Navy
Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense,
(Military Personnel Policy)

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